

GOVERNOR OUTLINES ENERGY PROPOSAL

By Rob Chaney

Gov. Brian Schweitzer wants his car to cook his dinner.

And heat the bath water, power the TV and sell electricity at a profit on the national grid.

The idea's no more outlandish than America's leap from Depression-wracked isolationism with a fifth-rate military to world-dominating superpower in the four years from Pearl Harbor to V-E Day. What's outlandish, in Schweitzer's opinion, is the corporate resistance to change that's stalled such ideas.

During a visit to Missoula on Thursday, Schweitzer said he'd outlined his energy vision during last month's National Governors Association summit on alternative transportation fuels and advanced vehicles in Florida. He wasn't happy with the response from automakers, who told him it would take 30 years to adapt present factories to all-electric car production.

But people outside the auto industry and outside the United States are already racing ahead on such vehicles. Whether it's the Toyota Prius or some venture capitalist's demo engine, Schweitzer said he's banking on public demand moving away from gasoline-powered cars.

Two pieces of federal legislation would trigger the revolution. One would be a 15 percent tax credit on the price of electric cars. The other would be to turn the national electricity grid into an open market where any producer could participate.

It's that second part that powers Schweitzer's idea. It goes like this: Electricity is expensive during the peak business hours of the day, but cheap at night. Electric cars are essentially portable batteries. Car owners can recharge them any time, day or night. And even current models can store more energy than the average driver needs for daily travel.

So why not plug cars into the grid at night, when electricity is cheap, and then use surplus (nondriving) energy to run home appliances? Furthermore, how about selling some of that cheap late-night electricity back to the national grid during expensive, peak-power times?

As Schweitzer sees it, the biggest challenge would be the accounting system needed to keep track of everyone's electrical deposits and withdrawals. The automotive technology and electrical power capacity already exists.

A new National Governors Association report cites figures from the Electric Power Research Institute Journal's fall 2005 issue, which says "plug-in hybrids could operate inexpensively (as low as 75 cents per-gallon equivalent), reduce oil consumption by 60 percent and cut greenhouse gas emissions by two-thirds ? compared with traditional vehicles."

While the association's "Call to Action" didn't include Schweitzer's full vision of home battery independence, it did argue that the nation's electricity capacity was up to the task. And it suggested that the change would likely come from state initiatives rather than federal action.

Schweitzer sits on the NGA's Clean Energy Future Task Force with fellow governors Tim Pawlenty (Minnesota), Kathleen Sebelius (Kansas), Jodi Rell (Connecticut), Charlie Crist (Florida), Linda Lingle (Hawaii), Edward Rendell (Pennsylvania) and Christine Gregoire (Washington).

While the association's report had a couple of pages of ideas for clean-coal technology, Schweitzer said nothing Thursday about his own campaign to foster new coal-fired generators in Montana. He also said nothing about a proposed deal to build a coal gasification plant in the eastern part of the state, which has failed to materialize.

Instead, he touted his efforts to add solar panels to the governor's mansion and his intention to buy an all-electric, American-built car as soon as one becomes available. He also hopes to attract a production facility for wind turbines to the state. And he's called on state government agencies to reduce power consumption 20 percent by 2010.